

## SPECIAL REVIEW ESSAY SECTION

A. R. Hochschild:

*Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*  
 New York 2016: The New Press 351 pp.

### Emotional Energies Trump Material Self-interest

This book is at least two things: the intervention of a public intellectual into America's 'broken politics', and a sociological inquiry into the individual foundations for the success of right-wing parties among disadvantaged voter groups. It is a formidable example of the first and, at the very least, a thought-provoking contribution to the second. Corresponding to this double identity, the book pursues two goals. As a piece of sociology, it wants to explain the classic paradox that many voters support political forces against what appear as their obvious self-interest (in this case the Tea Party/Republicans/Trump with their pro-business/anti-environment policies). As a political intervention, I read *Strangers in Their Own Land* as an attempt to find a language that might help the antagonistic political camps to at least talk to each other; maybe even as an attempt to provide a role model for how to overcome division and hatred. The word 'empathy', hence, plays an important role in this book. I will deal with the two goals in turn.

Hochschild's starting point is the 'Great Paradox': why do people support parties that advocate policies in stark contrast to what looks like their obvious interests? Why do rural nature lovers vote against environmental protection and even feel intense resentment against it? Why do people living in poor regions or even experiencing acute need reject redistribution? Hochschild's approach is to get in touch with people in Louisiana, a state that represents this paradox in extreme form.

Through long and repeated conversations, she tries to get a deep understanding of their subjectivity and how it matters for politics.

Can *Strangers in Their Own Land* teach us something new about the alignment of disadvantaged voters with (radical) right-wing parties? I would have liked to read more about what Hochschild herself thinks about this question. After all, her inquiry stands in a long tradition of similar analyses—for example, Gaventa [1980] or Cramer Walsh [2012]. What is missing in existing research, according to Hochschild, is 'a full understanding of emotion in politics' (p. 15). This is an intriguing starting point, although one should acknowledge that emotions by now are an important topic in political science, including the mix of anger and anxiety that is so important for populist appeals.

In times in which we intensely debate the 'politics of anger' or 'fear', saying that emotions matter becomes almost tautological. It begs the question where emotions come from and how exactly they influence political behaviour. While the book provides fascinating insights into the feelings of citizens and their sources, the answers to these questions remain somewhat implicit. Are emotions mediators of socio-economic experiences and relative deprivation, as suggested by the metaphorical 'cutting in line' of women and minority groups (pp. 136–139)? Do they result from ingroup-outgroup distinctions? Are they generated or mobilised in (apolitical?) group rituals? To what extent do they reflect the wider power structure, as in Gaventa's account of Appalachian miners?

Are they even the consequence of direct manipulation through the media and politicians? Or are they a response to what is perceived as 'symbolic violence' through the dominant culture of liberal elites?

It seems that Hochschild has all these processes in mind when she writes about anger, mourning and fear. What is missing, in my view, is a final chapter tying them together in a theoretical argument. Particularly interesting would have been her view on how much political communication strategies purposefully influence the emotional world of her interview partners. It never really became clear to me how much difference there actually is between her findings and Thomas Frank's [2004] manipulation argument in *What's the Matter with Kansas*. It seems that Hochschild sees a great deal of manipulation, but emphasising it would probably create a tension with the laudable goal of respecting and taking seriously the people she met. In any case, by laying out the complexity of political emotions, Hochschild has made an important first step that should be taken up by political sociology.

It is interesting that the discussion at times implicitly moves from distinct emotions (anger, fear, sadness) to a continuum of emotional *energy*. What makes people strangers in their own land has a lot to do with an attack on symbols and rituals that used to be charged with energising feelings of pride, belonging, and solidarity. But these feelings can be restored through interaction rituals. In a brief but insightful chapter (15), Hochschild describes how a Trump rally with its symbolism and appeals achieves this 'emotional transformation'; how it produces 'collective effervescence' that makes participants feel 'hopeful, joyous, elated' (p. 225). Hochschild suggests that it could ultimately be this (restoring of) emotional energy which motivates Trump voters. This notion of an 'emotional self-interest' (p. 226) builds a fascinating bridge to Randall Collins's [2004] work on

interaction rituals that has received far too little attention in political behaviour research. Not only academics should read this chapter carefully—also left-wing politicians with an interest in winning back the working class.

Based on her reconstruction of the 'deep story' underlying political views (Chapter 9), Hochschild goes on to derive three ideal-typical voters, each of whom corresponds to an explanation for why material self-interest is discounted (Chapters 10–12). The *team loyalist* (ideology, party identification), the *worshipper* (religiosity), and the *cowboy* (masculinity). These interpretations map neatly onto the results of quantitative studies into the interaction of self-interest with ideology, values, religion, or party identification. They add substance to these statistical exercises and are reassuring in terms of their external validity.

The book ends not with a typical academic conclusion, but with an appeal to the American public (Chapter 16). What makes this chapter compelling is that it not (only) questions whether poor Conservatives demand the right policies to pursue their goals ('take a look at Norway', p. 235). It also invites us to reflect on the hard-wired perspectives in our respective political bubbles. Liberals are reminded by Hochschild of the often forgotten point that polarization involves two sides and she proposes a view that might indeed help to challenge political default settings on the other side of the 'empathy wall'. This includes reflecting on how much one might benefit economically from misery in lower classes. It also means not focusing exclusively on problematic aspects of working-class culture but remembering its admirable aspects: 'loyalty, sacrifice, and endurance' (p. 234). But most importantly, Hochschild invites us to remember what our common experiences are: that cherished institutions and communities become threatened by global capitalism and the power of the big money. 'Ironically, you

[on the right] may have more in common with the left than you imagine, for *many on the left feel like strangers in their own land too*' (p. 236). In this commonality, Hochschild sees a possibility for a discourse overcoming political division. This hope is of course not new and, on the national level, it might seem almost utopian at the moment. But with its warm, respectful, and reflective perspective, *Strangers in Their Own Land* sets an example for how to begin in one's own life.

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#### References

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#### What Is the Deep Story of America's Far Right?

In this superb book, American sociologist Arlie Hochschild sets out to cross the 'empathy wall' that separates people of the left like herself from sympathisers with the radical right Tea Party. Rather than looking for quick certainties and being hostile to those who hold different political opinions, she wonders whether it 'is possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics' (p. 5)? She starts the journey to the heart of the American right with formulating a great paradox. Why is it

that people who most need government services hate government the most? And more specifically, why is it that the people living in southwest Louisiana, which has among the worst environmental pollution in the United States, are also those who most fiercely reject governmental regulations of corporate polluters? Surely, even fervent right-wingers, especially those deeply wedded to the land they live on, do not enjoy being exposed to chemical explosions or seeing their livelihoods sucked up in gigantic sinkholes. Yet, major environmental disasters have affected all the people Hochschild meets. Despite this, they keep voting for those who promise to further lure in oil and chemical companies, deregulate environmental rules, deny climate change, and get rid of federal government.

Hochschild addresses several existing explanations—such as the strategy of big corporations to create an 'astroturf grassroots following' (p. 13); voters being systematically misled by politicians, or still putting their cultural values before their economic interests—none of which she finds entirely satisfying. The one thing she misses in all existing explanations is 'a full understanding of emotion in politics. What, I wanted to know, do people *want to feel*, think they *should or shouldn't feel*, and what *do they feel* about a range of issues?' (p. 15). To get to the politics of emotions, Hochschild interviews about 40 Tea Party advocates, 20 teachers, social workers, lawyers, and government officials, and closely follows a small number of people to become acquainted with their histories, everyday lives, personal stories, and politics. Based on this, she constructs what she calls the 'deep story' of America's far right. The deep story is 'a feels-as-if story'—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgement. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. It is 'the *subjective prism* through which the party on the other side sees the world' (p. 135). It is the central